DID AUSTRALIA'S ABORIGINES SEE PLESIOSAURS? YES–IN A CHILDREN'S BOOK

To support their claim that humans and plesiosaurs coexisted, antievolution publications cite as evidence a plesiosaur painting by an artist of the Kuku Yalanji tribe of Australia. However, the painting is actually a copy of an illustration in a 1960 children's book on dinosaurs.

PHILIP J. SENTER

According to the young-Earth creationist (YEC) worldview, God created the Earth and the rest of the universe during a single week about 6,000 years ago, and he created humans and other kinds of organisms independently during the same week, as described in Genesis. This view rejects the abundant physical evidence that the Earth is over 4.5 billion years old (Gradstein et al. 2004), that the universe is billions of years older than that (Lineweaver 1999), and that all organisms evolved from a common ancestor over billions of years (Prothero 2007).

According to the physical evidence, non-avian dinosaurs and other monstrous reptiles such as pterosaurs, mosasaurs, and plesiosaurs became extinct at the end of the Mesozoic Era, 65 million years ago (Wicander and Monroe 2016), and the human species (*Homo sapiens*) did not come into being until about 200,000 years ago (McDougall et al. 2005). Humans and the monstrous reptiles of the Mesozoic Era are therefore separated by millions of years. To cast doubt upon the separation of humans and such beasts by millions of years—and by extension to cast doubt upon the passage of millions of years—YEC authors frequently cite archaeological "evidence" that ancient people came into contact with such reptiles. Such "evidence" usually consists of ancient, medieval, or more recent artwork that depicts creatures that the YEC authors claim are dinosaurs, pterosaurs, or plesiosaurs. Many such claims have been investigated and shown to be incorrect and based on taxidermic hoaxes or misidentifications of depictions of extant animals (Senter 2012; 2013; Senter and Wilkins 2013; Senter et al. 2013; Senter and Klein 2014).

Here I report an investigation of a similar claim in which the animal was correctly identified as a plesiosaur, but the artifact was incorrectly identified as evidence for the coexistence of humans and plesiosaurs. As it happens, the artifact is evidence of the coexistence of humans and a children's book.

Plesiosaurs are marine reptiles from the Jurassic and Cretaceous Periods of the Mesozoic Era, with forelimbs and hindlimbs that are modified into flippers. They include two main groups: pliosauroids and plesiosauroids. The former are short-necked reptiles with large heads and long snouts. The latter are mostly long-necked animals with small heads (Carroll 1988).

Young-Earth creationists claim that this painting by a member of the Kuku Yalanji tribe of Queensland, Australia, proves that humans and dinosaurs coexisted.

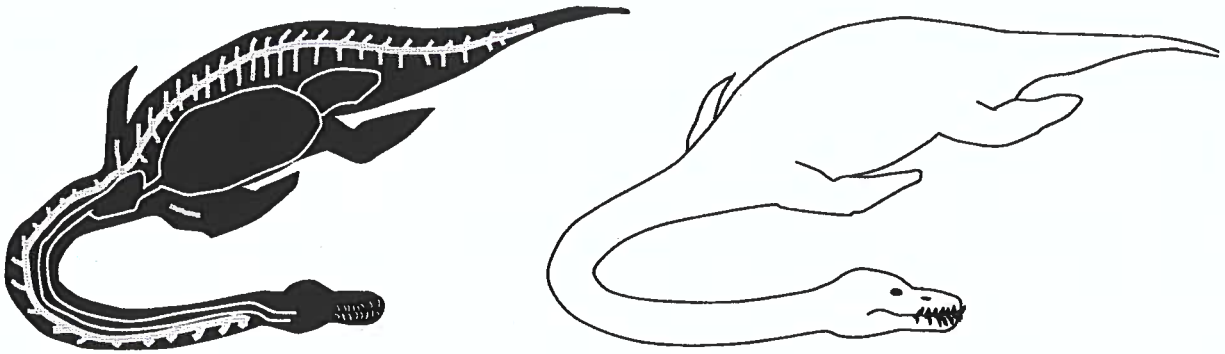


Figure 1. A copy of the plesiosaur in the Kuku Yalanji painting, with some details omitted (left); and the outline of Rudolph Zallinger's painting of the plesiosaur Elasmosaurus on page forty-seven of *The Giant Golden Book of Dinosaurs* (Watson 1960) (right).

In 1998, the YEC magazine *Creation* published an article titled "Australia's Aborigines...Did They See Dinosaurs?" by Rebecca Driver (1998). The article included a photo of a painting of a plesiosaur displaying its digestive tract and spinal column, in the "X-ray vision" style that is common in the art of Aboriginal Australians. According to Driver, the painting had been donated to the YEC organization Answers in Genesis and had been painted by a member of the Kuku Yalanji tribe of Queensland, Australia, at the request of a missionary. The missionary had asked one of the tribe's artists to paint a Kuku Yalanji story in which a monster called Yarru, which lived in a water hole, swallowed a maiden. In the painting, Yarru is depicted as a long-necked, small-headed, flippered animal resembling a plesiosaur (Figure 1). According to Driver, "the tribal artist, with very little formal education, had no knowledge of what so-called prehistoric animals looked like, and was drawing only from the descriptions handed down in ancient stories." Driver included the painting as "evidence" that humans from Australia had encountered live plesiosaurs.

The painting generated much interest in YEC circles. Several YEC authors subsequently cited it as "evidence" of human-plesiosaur coexistence (Hovind n.d.; Jerlström 1998; Genesis Park 1999–2017; Goertzen 2001; Gilmer 2011; 2013; Woetzel 2012). One author even asserted that the digestive tract in the painting indicated "that these animals had been hunted and butchered" (Jerlström 1998), an assertion that others repeated (Genesis Park 1999–2017; Woetzel 2012; Gilmer 2013).

The painting was cited by proponents of both sides of a controversy within the YEC community over the famous *Zuiyo-maru* carcass. The carcass had been hauled aboard the Japanese fishing vessel *Zuiyo-maru* in 1977. As widely circulated photographs show (see reproductions in Kuban 1997), it looked remarkably like a plesiosaur. However, biochemical testing and diagnostic anatomical features demonstrated that the carcass was that of a badly decomposed shark (Kuban 1997). A flurry of articles in YEC journals endorsed the conclusion that the carcass was that of a large shark—probably a basking shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*), given its large size (Wood 1997; 1998; Jerlström and Elliott 1999; 2005; Jerlström and de Roos 2005). To their credit, some YEC authors even conducted studies of new carcasses of basking sharks, pointing out that specific aspects of the decay process in that species produced carcasses that matched the details of the *Zuiyo-maru* carcass (Jerlström and Elliott 1999; 2005; Jerlström and de Roos 2005); for example, after the jaws and gill arches fall off early in the decay process, basking shark carcasses gain a superficially plesiosaur-like shape with the braincase and anterior torso vertebrae resembling a small head on a long neck.

Nonetheless, other YEC authors insisted that the *Zuiyo-maru* carcass was that of a plesiosaur (Bowden 1998; Zillmer 1998; 2005; DeYoung 2000; Goertzen 2001; Pe-

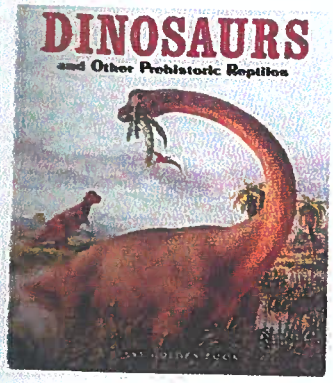
In 1977, the Japanese fishing vessel *Zuiyo-maru* hauled aboard a carcass that many young-Earth creationists claimed was a plesiosaur. Tests showed that it was the carcass of a badly decomposed shark.

tersen 2002), and one author used the Kuku Yalanji painting as part of his argument. YEC author John Goertzen (2001) pointed out that the Kuku Yalanji painting appears to show a dorsal fin protruding above the dorsal surface of the animal at the shoulder. Although other YEC authors identified that fin as the right pectoral fin (fore-fin) (Jerlström and Elliott 1999), Goertzen (2001) correctly pointed out that it is narrower than the left pectoral fin in the painting and that it lacks the bend in the middle of the fin that is present in the left pectoral fin in the painting. Goertzen identified this narrower fin as one of a pair of dorsal fins that he said the *Zuiyo-maru* carcass sported, although in reality the carcass retained only a single dorsal fin that was quite broad, not narrow (Kuban 1997).

Regardless of the identity of the fin in question, the Kuku Yalanji painting does look remarkably like a plesiosaur. How could a Kuku Yalanji artist depict a plesiosaur so well without his ancestors having coexisted with them? With a little help from a children's book. The Kuku Yalanji painting is a copy of Rudolph Zallinger's painting of the plesiosaur *Elasmosaurus* from page forty-seven of Jane Watson's *The Giant Golden Book of Dinosaurs* (Watson 1960). The Kuku Yalanji artist added the digestive tract and vertebral column, but the outline of the animal is a precise reproduction of Zallinger's painting (Figure 1), right down to the orientation of the neck, the bend in the middle of the left pectoral and pelvic fins, and the domed shape of the head. The fin in the painting that Goertzen (2001) mistook for a dorsal fin is actually the right pectoral fin, which the Kuku Yalanji artist depicted with the same shape and dimensions as in Zallinger's painting (Figure 1).

The Kuku Yalanji painting is a poor piece of evidence that people had "hunted and butchered" plesiosaurs, because it does not reflect accurate knowledge of plesiosaurian anatomy. In the Kuku Yalanji painting, the plesiosaur's head has a domed shape that is absent in real plesiosaur skulls but is present in Zallinger's painting. In the Kuku Yalanji painting, each of the vertebrae of the torso bears a prominent, downward-pointing spike, a feature absent in actual plesiosaur trunk vertebrae. Also, the intestine in the painting is short, broad, and straight, unlike the long, narrow, coiled intestines of reptiles.

The YEC community did get one important thing right: the animal in the Kuku Yalanji painting is indeed a plesiosaur. However, it was copied from a painting in a children's book, not from "descriptions handed down in ancient stories." The Kuku Yalanji painting is not evidence of human coexistence with plesiosaurs. Rather, it is evidence of human coexistence with *The Giant Golden Book of Dinosaurs*.



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